Facts on Pertussis
(Whooping Cough)

What is pertussis?
Pertussis, also called whooping cough, is a disease that is easily spread and causes a hacking, dry cough that can last several weeks or even months. Pertussis may begin with cold-like symptoms or a dry cough that progresses to severe coughing attacks.

Who can get pertussis?
You can get pertussis at any age. Those are at highest risk include very young children and those who are not yet fully vaccinated. Adolescents and adults, because of waning protection from vaccines, often get pertussis and transmit it to children.

How is pertussis spread?
Pertussis is spread from person to person by cough droplets from an infected person.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?
Symptoms of pertussis start out like a common cold (sneezing, runny nose, low-grade fever and mild cough). Within 2 weeks, the cough usually becomes more severe and may be followed by a high pitched “whoop” sound and/or vomiting. Cough spells may continue for 1 to 2 months, and get more severe at night. Older adults and children who have received part of the vaccine series may have milder symptoms.

How soon do symptoms appear after exposure to pertussis?
Symptoms usually appear in 7 to 10 days, but can occur as early as 4 days and as late as 21 days.

How long is an infected person able to spread pertussis?
If untreated, an infected person can spread pertussis for 3 weeks after the start of coughing. If an appropriate antibiotic is given, the time period which pertussis can be spread is reduced to 5 days.

What are the complications of pertussis?
Major complications are more common in infants and young children and may include pneumonia, middle ear infection, persistent vomiting, sleep disturbances, temporary loss of consciousness, dehydration, seizures, delay of breathing, and even death.

What can be done to prevent the spread of pertussis?
The best way to prevent pertussis is to make sure your family is vaccinated.
- Children should receive a pertussis vaccine in combination with diphtheria and tetanus (DTaP) at 2, 4, and 6 months, between 15-18 months, and between 4 to 6 years of age (5 shots by start of elementary school).
- Adolescents should receive a Tdap vaccine at 11 or 12 years of age.
- Adults should also receive a single Tdap vaccine in place of their regular tetanus booster.

In addition, people with pertussis should be treated with antibiotics to reduce the amount of time pertussis can be spread. People who have pertussis should stay away from young children and infants until 5 days of antibiotic treatment. Children should stay out of school until 5 days after treatment begins. All close contacts of a case should also receive 5 days of antibiotics for prevention.

For more information, contact the Onondaga County Health Department at 435-3280.